



PHOTOGRAPH BY CURTIS BELL

JOHN W. ALEXANDER  
IN HIS NEW YORK STUDIO

ADDRESS  
OF  
MR. JOHN G. AGAR  
*President National Arts Club*  
AND RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED AT THE  
TESTIMONIAL TO  
JOHN W. ALEXANDER  
UNDER THE AUSPICES OF  
THE FINE ARTS FEDERATION OF NEW YORK  
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

SUNDAY EVENING  
MAY TWENTY-EIGHTH  
NINETEEN-SIXTEEN

## ADDRESS OF MR. AGAR

IT is well for us to call to mind with gratitude the life and work of John W. Alexander.

It is also fitting that we should do so at the invitation of the Fine Arts Federation of New York, comprising in its membership representatives of most of the arts, and thus recalling the wide reach of his artistic aspirations. And it is especially fitting that we should do so here; here in the city of his ultimate achievement; here where he wrought and won and died, leaving an example rich in moral energy and in spiritual accomplishment.

Now when the sounds of war disturb our ears and the standards of material strength and glory are worshipped, it is timely to recall his life and learn from it how our richest national development has been forced by those who make their conquests in the spiritual order.

And when we examine his story from the day when he came to New York, unknown, at eighteen years of age, to the day, a year ago, when he passed away, we find a long, strong effort to live a life of spiritual benefit through artistic achievement, maintained with courage, confidence, unselfishness, crowned with success glorious to him and inspiring to us.

Born near Pittsburg in 1856, he was early left an orphan, and was thus early forced to develop his character in an environment not too encouraging.

For a while he was sent to the public schools by his grandparents. But he left school at twelve and took a position in Pittsburg as a messenger boy for a telegraph company. An officer of that company became interested

in him and, upon the death of his grandfather, brought him to his own home and later assumed his guardianship. Here the boy lived until he was eighteen.

But wishing beyond all things to become an artist, he decided to move to New York. Here he arrived in 1874, unknown and unbefriended, and presented himself to Harper Brothers, requesting to be placed in the Art Department.

He was told no position was vacant except that of office boy. He took that place and reported for duty next morning. For eight months he labored and made a mark for promptness and efficiency.

At that time illustrations for magazines were made by work directly upon the wooden block, several men frequently working upon the same block, and this was the work assigned to him when he was finally transferred to the Illustrating Department. He usually put in the figures, but such composite illustrations were mostly unsigned. We do not find much that throws light upon this period of Alexander's work, although there appear occasionally cartoons signed by him between September, 1875, and the middle of the year 1877. They are very interesting and amusing.

He remained there for about three years, and in the late summer of 1877, with three hundred dollars saved, he sailed from Philadelphia for Liverpool. He went to Paris, and, finding the *École des Beaux Arts* closed for repairs, passed on to Munich. Here he studied for about three months in the class of Professor Benzour at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. But the expense of living in Munich being too high and the method of the school being too severe and academic, Alexander moved on to Pölling in Northern Bavaria, where there was a small colony of American artists.

Here he began to paint.

From this school he sent some of his drawings to the Students' Exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. He was awarded a bronze medal, his first honor. Two years, embracing 1878 and 1879, were thus spent.

After leaving Pölling, Mr. Alexander joined a class of art students which Frank Duveneck had arranged to take to Florence, where they spent the next two years, going in the summer to Venice.

He made his living by sending drawings back to *Harpers's*. Later in Florence he started an art class, and this was successful. So much of his time, however, was taken in teaching that he realized that his own work and development were in danger, and he determined to return home to Pittsburg. Upon his arrival there he had no money and found little opportunity, so he came back to New York in 1881 and remained here for about ten years.

But he spent two summers abroad, in 1884 in Spain and Morocco, and in 1886 in doing work on the Continent for the *Century Magazine*.

He was married in 1887 to Miss Elizabeth Alexander. And then began an influence which grew with years, not less elevating than tender, not less stimulating than lasting, and which united in itself the tenacious beauty of the vine that clings and the confident dignity of the tree that supports.

During this decade Mr. Alexander failed to impress upon his countrymen either the beauty of his work or the fineness of his character; so that early in 1890, disappointed and depressed at this failure, he went to France, expecting to be absent two years, but remaining eleven years, laboring at his art and doing much of his best artistic work.

Remember that during this time, with a wife and baby

boy, he was struggling to live by his art and to make his art live, and that he had been refused recognition at home.

But, strong and confident in his own ability to win recognition, he never wavered, and what his countrymen then failed to appreciate France soon found worthy of high honor.

At the exhibition of the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris in the spring of 1893 he displayed three portraits. This group was the feature of the exhibition. The pictures were marked Number One, were hung together in a panel, and he was immediately after elected an Associate of the Society. This was followed by the exhibit at the Grafton Gallery in London of two portraits, which were given a place of honor.

In the spring of the next year, 1894, he exhibited a group of five portraits and two compositions at the Beaux Arts, and in June he was elected to full membership in that Society, was made Sociétaire with the privilege of exhibiting *hors concours*, of voting with the Society and of serving on its juries.

The honors bestowed by France placed Mr. Alexander at once among the front rank of the younger painters in that country. He was then thirty-eight years of age.

His ability was soon thereafter recognized everywhere, even at home, and his success in having his message read assured.

He was invited to contribute to the exhibitions of Europe and of the United States, and today nearly every important prominent collection, national and civic, contains an example of his work—the Luxembourg in Paris, museums in Petrograd, Odessa and Vienna, in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Minneapolis and Providence, Stevens



Institute of Technology, Princeton, Yale, Harvard and Columbia Universities. Medals and awards came to him from most distinguished sources.

His first medal was won at the Students' Exhibition at Munich about 1879, and the last was from the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco in 1915.

Between these years the Pennsylvania Fine Arts Academy, the Carnegie Institute, the Society of American Artists, the Society of Washington Artists, the Exposition Universelle of Paris, the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, the Universal Exposition at St. Louis, gave by their awards and medals further evidence of the full recognition which he won as a painter of unusual ability and distinction.

In 1901 France made him a Knight of the Legion of Honor, and in 1909 Princeton University made him a Doctor of Literature.

In 1901 Mr. Alexander and his family returned to America, and from that time until the end, May 31st of last year, he lived in this city, worked ceaselessly at his painting and sought intensely to promote the interest of art in America and the interest of his country in the arts.

At this time his merit was universally recognized and his fight won. But, instead of resting, he began a new effort to benefit his country which was not less arduous because its success was more certain.

He took an active interest in various art societies, and at the time of his death was associated, as officer or prominent member, with twenty such organizations. Notably, he was President of the National Academy of Design and of the Fine Arts Federation of this city; of the National Institute of Arts and Letters; of the National Academy Association, and of the School Art League of New York.

A closer study of his life shows three predominant qualities: The quality of power, the quality of beauty, and the quality of sacrifice.

His power is shown in the success of his career. His character, formed in the furnace of trial, inspiring his every effort, made the end inevitable.

There was no show of force, no effort to be conspicuous, but the quiet working out by strength of will of the destiny which his imagination made glorious. From the time when he succeeded in getting into Harper's by accepting the position of office boy, to the time when he took his first prize for drawing at Munich, through the period of his failure in New York to the acknowledgment of his merit in 1893 on the Champs de Mars, down to the last medal in 1915, all was accomplished quietly and surely by little outside aid, by no fortunate accidents, by nothing less than a serene power, clear in vision, sure in its result and imperative in its demand.

The power was in his soul and the means used were spiritual.

As an artist, Beauty was his bride. He loved her too much to sacrifice to her either truth in his message or sincerity in his method.

We have had little time in this country to devote to the production of beauty or to the study of its forms. We have had to devise and develop a political government, conquer a wilderness, fashion the commerce and industry of a throbbing nation in a vast continent. Our best minds have been too much occupied with these immediate works to find time for the larger spiritual endeavor, apparently less important. But with the last decade of the nineteenth century came a wider, more general, popular appreciation of all that nature means, a gradual understanding that all do not live by bread alone, and that the expres-



sion of beauty is in itself a worthy work for the greatest.

Heretofore and mainly what art we had came from foreign lands or was estimated by foreign standards. But by a slow process there has appeared an appreciation here of the important spiritual forces set free by the pursuit of beauty. Education has opened up new views to us, and gradually we are becoming as a nation alive to the beautiful, as an end in itself.

Mr. Alexander has been one of the forces in this awakening, both by his painting and by his educational and social effort.

In all his painting he was courageously modern, looking to a fresher world of pictorial imagery.

He shows a rare candor of impression. The frankness of a new civilization is in his pictures. In them everywhere one feels the vitality of a young and vigorous race—a race to whom beauty appeals with all the zest of a recent discovery. One of his critics has said that it is this note which his work oftenest sounds, reaching us in countless ways and from a thousand varied color chords in gown, background or bit of still life.

That is the beauty new-found which he expresses, not as a foreigner to a strange people, but as a native to his own. He loved it, worked for it and expressed it for his people. They took it from him and love it the more as coming from him, and love him the more for bringing it to them in such form.

French and American critics have sharpened their faculties to point out his individualities, his faults and his merits. But to his countrymen it is the new harmony of his conception with the highest spiritual type expressed in flowing lines, in fine and delicate shades, that appeals.

Princeton University, giving him a degree, said:

"The firm brilliancy of his work, tempered by an even finer restraint, and the engaging beauty of his conceptions matched by a like beauty in execution, make him a master whom we gladly enroll."

But the place he filled in the art life in his country was far more extensive and important than is found in his paintings. His relation to his fellow artists and absorption in their welfare, his interest in art education, in the public schools and in the use of museums by American children, his efforts to harmonize true culture with the democratic ideal, are all elements in the influence which he exercised, and they all had their object to teach the value of beauty, to preach devotion to beauty as an end, all sufficient in itself.

By seeking to make the love of beauty a controlling motive of expression, he sought to give direction to the intellectual energies called into play by the awakening national sentiment, as he believed that in the highest forms of artistic expression morality and beauty are inseparable, if not identical.

His association with the School Art League is an instance of his methods and measures, one out of many. When the School Art League was finally and fully organized in 1911 he was elected President. He attended the meetings regularly. From that moment the movement grew steadily. He frequently visited the public schools, was always ready to offer suggestions for the advancement of the work there. Of particular value was his interest in the scholarship students, some of whom he invited to his home to criticise their work.

At his suggestion an evening life class for women was organized at the National Academy of Design.

Although one medal had been since 1909 given for fine craftsmanship in the elementary schools, Mr. Alexander

gave a medal in each high school. Twenty-four were awarded for the first time in 1915—"too late," one member of the Society wrote, "too late for our beloved President to have the pleasure of seeing them."

Another typical instance of his devotion was the decoration of Washington Irving High School. This was promoted by the Municipal Art Society. Mr. Alexander was chairman of the committee having this work in charge, and as such passed upon all the designs submitted for these decorations. He presented to Mrs. E. H. Harriman the plan for a series of decorations in that school, and she, under the spell of his enthusiasm, commissioned Barry Faulkner to paint all the panels for one of the halls. He approved all the sketches and the finished relief by Miss Frances Grimes above the mantel in the same hall, and approved with equal heartiness the Municipal Art Society's own decoration in the staircase hall drawn by Mr. Stoughton, stipulating that the execution of the panels should be entrusted to some young, even unknown, artist, who might so obtain his first recognition. This was done, and the work of Lascari promises to be as he would have wished it to be.

His interest and work in stage decoration is another chapter in the book of his intense industry.

Although his interest in dramatic work showed itself first in his personal interest in Maude Adams, his energies soon overflowed this boundary and became an eager striving to improve the art of stage setting. He became the adviser of Maude Adams in the setting of "Peter Pan" and "Chanticleer." In this latter play he produced not only unusual stage effects of mystery in the forest scene, but developed the practical advantage of having the scenery on thin gauze so as to be easily rolled for cheap transportation.

All of this work culminated in the presentation of "Joan of Arc" in the Stadium at Boston.

Tireless effort was devoted to it by him. Stage hands were posed in various costumes under his direction and their costumes were modified, simplified and changed in color until an artistic result was had.

No less than twenty-two hundred people were used in the pageant, with scenery arranged to represent the facade of the Cathedral of Rheims at one time, and at another to represent an artificial hill so as to secure the necessary elevation in grouping the subordinates.

The dramatic profession quickly recognized his ability in stage decoration, and he was often called in as an expert in color, in costume and in general stage arrangement by prominent actors.

Again, his ability as a critic and his constructive industry had rare scope in his association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

He became a member of the Board of Trustees of the Museum in 1910 by virtue of being President of the National Academy of Design. He took an active interest in developing the scope of the Museum's influence, joining heartily in the endeavor to increase the use of the Museum by the people and to afford them opportunity to study the best and greatest variety of art objects.

He was, at the time of his death, a member of the Executive Committee and of the Committee on Purchases, and chairman of the Committee on Paintings.

His interest in the McDowell Club was due to its design to promote the association of artists, writers and musicians.

It was McDowell's idea that no school of music could develop in this country without the coöperation of the other arts, and Alexander labored long to promote this intimate association.

One of his last active interests was the Peterborough

Colony, where a home is provided by the McDowell Fund for writers, painters and musicians, and where they may feel free from care and undisturbed by the discords which so jarred upon Mr. Alexander's own early life.

He also spent much time in developing the Alexander canvas. Textures of ordinary burlap appealed to him, but knowing that this was not permanent he induced some manufacturers in France to weave the same texture in linen. He then, in collaboration with many artist friends, spent hours in experimenting with the preparation for the texture. When he perfected his experiments he turned the result over to the manufacturer for the benefit of all artists.

We all know too well Mr. Alexander's long and earnest efforts to erect an art building in this city, where all the arts may be brought together in coöperation.

The construction of a great and artistic art temple out of the offerings of the people was his dream.

He remembered the magnificent buildings erected in the Middle Ages by large private donations, by public contributions, but principally by the voluntary offerings of the poor—buildings which expressed their pride and patriotic fervor, which brought them together in celebrations of civic events.

He longed for such an edifice in New York, but he failed to build it, and, in failing, gave his life to the cause.

Should we not take courage from his failure and make the vision real in the near future?

That would be an incomparable memorial to his incomparable spirit.

I have instanced these activities of Mr. Alexander to prove how real and immediate was his love of beauty in all its forms. He was an echo in our life of the long-gone age when beauty was supreme; when the spirit of art

penetrated every department of life and gave form to all the products of design, in the great cathedrals, in statues and pictures, in the weaving and embroidering of stuffs, in the shape and ornament of dress, in metal work, in the work of the blacksmith and of the goldsmith, in armor, in jewelry, in articles for the table and the altar, in the woodwork of the carpenter and of the joiner.

He recognized the principle that there is a community in the arts and that they do not flourish in isolation, and longed for the day to come again when an artistic imagination would guide the hand in all the work it did.

I have spoken in vain if I have not shown the quality of sacrifice which animated him in all of his activities.

Gifted with a fine presence, an engaging personality, a ready judgment and a sweeping imagination, he made and held many close friends.

But his appeal was to the wider sphere of his fellow citizens, to schoolboys and to schoolgirls, to all who needed his advice and to all who heeded his incessant call.

He prayed to be allowed to help, and he spared himself little in the long days during which that help was given. His frail frame, unable longer to hold his aspiring soul, gave way before its time, all too soon.

He was in truth the servant.

In his life he attained the ideal of his profession—to create beauty, to hold it up to his fellow countrymen and to make them realize that the highest happiness is to live in the region of things impalpable, the beautiful life of self-forgetfulness.

In his death he has become the possession of the country.

He has taken with him his powers, but he has left to us his beauty and his sacrifice.



*RESOLUTIONS  
IN REFERENCE TO THE PERMANENT  
MEMORIAL*

**Whereas**, The eminence of John W. Alexander as an artist and his broad usefulness in advancing the cause of Art in the community in which he lived, and in the whole country, entitle him to recognition from his fellow artists in a lasting memorial, to his memory; and

**Whereas**, The influence of his high achievements as a painter, which place him among the foremost of American artists, should be disseminated as widely as possible by making the American people familiar with his pictures; and

**Whereas**, His efficient service in connection with the teaching of art in the public schools should be marked by some constant reminder of this service,

**Be it resolved:**

**that** a bronze tablet bearing a portrait of Mr. Alexander with a suitable inscription be procured, and placed temporarily in the rooms of the National Academy of Design in the Fine Arts Society Building, and finally in the permanent building for the United Art Societies which it is hoped will be erected in the City of New York, and toward the realization of which Mr. Alexander devoted so much of his time and energy; and

**that** a comprehensive collection of large photographic reproductions of Mr. Alexander's work be formed, to be used as a traveling exhibition, and sent from town to town through the country, and exhibited in such art museums, libraries and schools as may be able to exhibit the pictures properly; and

**that** the design of the tablet or such features as are suitable shall be used for striking a medal, to be known as the John W. Alexander medal.



THE JOHN W. ALEXANDER MEDAL  
BY JOHN FLANAGAN  
AWARDED BY THE SCHOOL ART LEAGUE  
OF NEW YORK